

University of Massachusetts Amherst
ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst

Greek Color Theory and the Four Elements

Art

July 2000

Chapter 5: Observations on the coloration of sculpture

J.L. Benson

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/art_jbgc

Benson, J.L., "Chapter 5: Observations on the coloration of sculpture" (2000). *Greek Color Theory and the Four Elements*. 9.
Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/art_jbgc/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Greek Color Theory and the Four Elements by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

V.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE COLORATION OF SCULPTURE

INTRODUCTION

It would be very productive for our understanding of the way the ancient Greeks thought about color if we could see their sculpture (and architecture) in something like the condition in which the creators of these entrusted their products to the world. For certainly there was much color on them, of which now we find generally only the most minimal traces—if that. Even colored photographs of sculpture tell us little in this respect except the color of the stone. In general, these traces are so little noticeable that they hardly intrude on our consciousness when we speak about the works. Art historians virtually confine themselves to form analysis—as also in my parallel study of sculpture.¹ A vital part of the reality that was is simply lost. This is not to imply that researchers have ignored the problem. On the contrary much thought has gone into it. But the apparently insuperable difficulties inherent in the problem make firm reconstructions of Greek art in full color seem risky and, in any case, such reconstructions would probably seem bizarre to our neoclassicizing eyes! It was therefore never my intention to attempt new investigations of ancient artifacts in order to glean a few more details about their color. It suffices me to offer a few observations on the general trend of color usage in Greek sculpture in the light of the four element and four color systems, using as a basis the careful investigations of Patrik Reuterswärd's *Studien zur Polychromie der Plastik*² (references thereto cited as R plus page number). Naturally, the following, necessarily provisional, observations would not be feasible without some guidelines gained from the foregoing study of color in Greek painting.

ARCHAIC AND PROTOCLASSICAL PERIODS

Non-architectural Figures

From the very beginning of the kouros type in stone, traces of red, especially in the coiffure, indicate the use of color; in the case of female statues red also occurs on the garment (Berlin goddess). In many cases the possibility that this red was an undercoat or at least part of another color must be weighed. For the Berlin goddess yellow is postulated for the hair. It seems that gradually the plain white of the marble, as in the case of the Protoclassical korai, came to be appreciated as a part of color harmony (R43), a conclusion that is supported by the role that white otherwise played in this period (see Chapter III, *The Emergence of Redfigure Style*, paragraph 13). Traces of black have been detected in the parts of these statues that simulate embroidery.

Thus, it appears that the usual four colors were represented—and even quite common, although not necessarily in combination—in sixth century Athens. In addition a few other colors occur (much less frequently), in particular blue and even a little green (in which case it must sometimes be questioned whether a blue or a green was intended). At any rate there is far less green, so that in general we have to do with a palette of the four colors plus blue. And again in individual figures blue is usually not conspicuous. In the contemporary pinax from Pitsa (see Chapter IV, *Panel Painting and Wall Painting: Mainland Greece*, The (Late) Archaic Period) we could ascertain a transcendent quality in the use of blue in garments on the basis of the context and the presence of violet. the korai statues were presumably dedicated to Athena, which would make blue a suitable color; but it is also possible that the costume of the korai figures reflects to some extent courtly conventions.

Architectural Sculpture

It should not be surprising that in this context the use of blue, particularly for hair and beards, is common (Zeus, Herakles, Bluebeard of the poros pediment, Giants of the Acropolis Museum 370, 631: R 66). This sculpture was created (in theory) to honor the gods in or on their temples. In this sense, the four elements are expanded coloristically to include the fifth, divine element, the color of which is blue. The application of transcendent blue, often together with red—which may be noetic as in the case of the costume of the pinax priestess—even to architectural details like water spouts, palmettes (and possibly other accented points: R 76) is an appropriate sign of the age. In the case of figures the preference for blue is not confined to the hair as such (where its use elicited from Reuterswärd, 77 the suggestion “Zeichen männlicher Kraft”, which is *at best* a secondary or derivative meaning), but applies to the whole head region, as in the blue helmet of Athena on both Aigina pediments, where the reference to divine, guiding intelligence (“cool” in the heat of battle) is inescapable. It is the red garment of Athena—red as the supreme noetic color—which refers to the strength and bravery which *human* warriors must have when inspired by the gods. At the latest from this point onward red had this mediating role, whether it appeared on clothes or artifacts of a military nature; thus, on the warriors of the same pediments: blue helmets (intelligence by osmosis) and

blue and red shields. This is another, important reason why red was *the* Classical color (see Chapter III, *Hellenistic Painting in the Light of the Cycles*, chart following paragraph 8).

At this point it is appropriate to offer an independent comment on the color of the Athena Parthenos of Phidias—insofar as this can be surmised—since that statue along with the Zeus of the same sculptor functioned as the quintessence of Greek religious sensibility. According to the evidence assembled by Neda Leipen (*Athena Parthenos*, a 1978 study to serve as a basis for a model reconstruction at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto), painting of certain facial features (but not much more) is documented by literary and archaeological evidence. Presumably this statue was indeed a dazzling chryselephantine composition; yet the actual colors of gold and ivory can not have been the point of departure for the depiction of the goddess, who in the three-dimensional representations was characterized by transcendent blue and noetic red. The colors of this particular statue then simply conformed to the nature of physical substances that have ever been used as the ideal enhancement of divine-royal status. The mimetic relation of gold to the sun as the source of all light and energy in the solar system is a truism; its hue is thus related to, but vastly transcends, yellow as the nearest spectral color, which at most has noetic implications. Ivory, for all its desirable rarity, has to be classified in the same way. Thus an exceptionally limiting noetic quality can not be “thought away” from the glory of the Athena Parthenos. Indeed, the very choice of these materials tells us—or rather confirms what history tells us—that a certain fateful element of self-indulgent, self-satisfied egotism had insinuated itself into the Athenian culture-makers as beneficiaries of the politics of the Delian League.

Thus from yet another angle we ascertain that the most brilliant hour of Athenian cultural hegemony was marred by the emplacement of a cancerous cell that would keep on growing. The dark side of the possession of physical wealth in overabundance—an affront to the ideal of moderation and balance—soon brought on sordid and disastrous consequences for the commission-giving city and even for the sculptor of this statue.

Reliefs

I shall comment first on Reuterswärd’s conviction that *grave* reliefs of the “Ripe Archaic” (my Protoclassical) period had, or could have, a red background—with a certain continuation into the Classical period. For the interpretation of red in this position (e.g., on the Aristion stele) one could refer to the traditional practice in ceramics of red as representing the physical element air (under certain conditions; I include here reddish hues). The interlocking of the four elements and four color systems always implies a wider potential for interpretation than ceramics alone, as evidenced in the realm of physiology (see Chapter II, *The Ancient Sources*, Hippocratic Writings, A, paragraph 1). To this problem must be added Reuterswärd’s observation that blue *became* usual as a background for *votive* reliefs, sometimes temple reliefs and similar (e.g., the Treasury of the Siphnians; R37). This usage, possibly somewhat later than the one just discussed, in any case places us squarely before the issue of ambiguity. If it is replacing a reddish hue, as seems likely, it may be a substitute for physical air. Yet in the consciousness of the

Protoclassical age the transcendent quality of blue still echoed very strongly, as we have just seen in regard to the pediment figures. So obviously blue would still harmonize with the sacral quality of votive reliefs and temples. But it is also how the sky (where the gods live) *looks* to the human sight. This could have been the fulcrum point at which the physicality of the color blue started to be realized. Nevertheless, the actual evidence from the sphere of painting makes it unwise to assume that transatmospheric blue significantly broke into the prevailing bias toward a four color world until after—perhaps well after—the Classical era.

CLASSICAL PERIOD (AND PROTOHELLENISTIC)

Original, non-architectural figures in stone are almost completely lacking to us, so that effectively one is forced to depend on architectural sculpture for evidence and even this is, to a great extent, in fragmentary condition. The Apollo of Olympia West had a “kräftig rotes” garment (R41), thus recalling the Athena of the Aphaia temple. Like the Olympia metopes, those of the Parthenon also had a blue background, which also appears on the Frieze of the Theseion (R52). In this period a study of the free-standing sculpture of various pediments and other monuments allows the conclusion that sculptors were willing to depend on the painting in of certain details, such as parts of footwear, in lieu of fashioning every part three-dimensionally. The same economy of effort can be inferred on many reliefs of the fourth century from prominent empty stretches in the composition in which logically representations should be found; if originally present these have faded completely out of existence. It seems therefore that illusionistically simulated reality was preferred over tangible three-dimensional copies of it. To the extent that this movement toward color affected the sculpture of the High Classical Reaction and Late Classical style, it fed the constantly deepening desire to “interiorize”, to seek the soul-in-self, expressed also in a different way by the self-absorption of torsional figures.

In the color usage of the fourth century the psychic attitude just referred to took the following course. Just as in wall-painting white or light was increasingly valued, so also in three-dimensional figures and relief. In the former, Reuterswärd (R83) points to the fact that the bare flesh of figures on the Alexander sarcophagus is not red but only slightly tinted (“leicht getönt”). In the latter category, colored backgrounds were sometimes abolished altogether (R66), as on the Mourning Women sarcophagus, the figures of which have the usual colors of that period: yellow and red shades, around which are clustered minor touches of violet, cobalt blue, rose, brown and green. The effects of colored figures against a white background are even more variegated on the Alexander sarcophagus. On the well-known Negro jockey relief in Athens National Museum the coloration is less marked and the greater part of the surface is left white.

It is clear that the development of earlier Greek sculpture sketched in terms of color by Reuterswärd had much in common with the course of color practice in contemporary painting. In the later Classical period and especially in the Hellenistic epoch the striving in Greek culture toward noetic self-sufficiency, exemplified *par*

excellence by Aristotle and his followers, is expressed in both media by a greater, more purposeful use of white. Most indicative is that the earlier concern for a physical, four-color representation of the atmosphere is in the end given up in favor of a mental abstraction, for white in elemental terms is not ever the color of air, but is habitually the color of warmth (either physical or mental energy). It is then the mental energy of the later figures that overwhelms and dominates the physical setting in which they exist. Visually, the atmosphere became a void. At least by Late Hellenistic times a naturalistic coloration of the atmosphere (blue) is represented, along with other colors, in painting but I am not aware that it was ever used in sculptural relief.

HELLENISTIC PERIOD

A kind of continuation of Reuterswärd's work now exists in a 1984 dissertation by Konstantin Yfantidis.³ This author does not, like the former, emphasize neutral backgrounds, but quite incidentally balances the situation by noting that there was what we may designate as a parallel, conservative stream that retained the earlier practice of blue, and also alternately red and yellow striped, backgrounds in certain reliefs. Yfantidis' concern is rather with the actual colors applied to three-dimensional figures: the preference for delicate, pastel-like tints attested by the Alexander sarcophagus became a general Hellenistic aesthetic principle. Thus, the tinting of terracotta figurines (Figure 37) and of life-size stone sculpture was "identical".

Because pastel colors are obtained by the admixture of white, the sculptural world adds its testimony, already established on the basis of a philosophy of the elements (see Chapter III, *Hellenistic Painting in the Light of the Cycles*, chart following paragraph 8), that it was the destiny of the last phase of Greek culture to come to terms with the phenomenon white, a factor that still fascinates philosophers in the twentieth century.⁴ Yfantidis also calls attention to a concomitant phenomenon in this phase, the spreading use of gilding. In this connection, it is useful to recall that for Plato yellow is white plus red plus the shining (see Chapter II, *The Ancient Sources*, Plato, paragraph 7). Yellow and red are noetic colors, white is both noetic and transcendental (Illustration 17). The shining must have been, in Plato's intentionality, metaphysical adrenalin so that he was elevating yellow, as it were, to the status of gold. In this sense, the human tendency to gild statues of gods, kings and heroes is understandable as admiration for an (often only ideal) model of purified egohood. The latter is underlined by the frequent association of gilding with white, for instance in the pastel colors and white backgrounds of Hellenistic art or equally well in the white and gilt walls of Rococo palaces. Obviously, the temptation to allow true egohood to degenerate into egotism can be overwhelming. The example of Baroque and Rococo monarchs is obvious enough and the extension of gilding to private portraits in the Late Hellenistic period, on which Yfantidis reports, would seem to be a less baneful example of the same weakness.